Darkness swallows up the house, and the next image you see is startling in its disembodiment: under a single, intense light, the face of a turbaned, aristocratic-looking woman materializes through the white screen.

What ensues is a wonderful piece of performance theater. Actress Beatrice Manley, her voice dowager-imperial, proceeds to personify from the neck up the horrible predicament that led to her character's decapitation literally at the hand of the minute hand of a giant church clock in Edgar Allan Poe's comparatively unfamiliar short story, "A Predicament."

The performance, lasting only 30 minutes and adhering to Poe's lines, is unforgettable in its uneasy, dreamlike power and in Manley's mesmerizing dramatization.